

AN INTERVIEW WITH ROBERT GLASGOW

Martin Jean

This interview is presented on the occasion of Robert Glasgow's being named International Performer of the Year by the New York City AGO Chapter. His award recital will be held on May 16, 7:30 P.M., at the Church of the Holy Family, 315 East 47th St., New York, N.Y. Dr. Glasgow will conduct a masterclass on May 17, 9:30 A.M.—12:30 P.M., at Brick Presbyterian Church, Park Ave. and 91st St., New York, N.Y.

MARTIN JEAN: What are some of your early memories of music?

ROBERT GLASGOW: When I was young, my mother used to substitute teach and take me to my aunt's home to be cared for. My aunt had a terrific record collection and would let me listen to my favorites. As soon as I could get my mouth open, I began singing and later joined junior choirs both in church and in school.

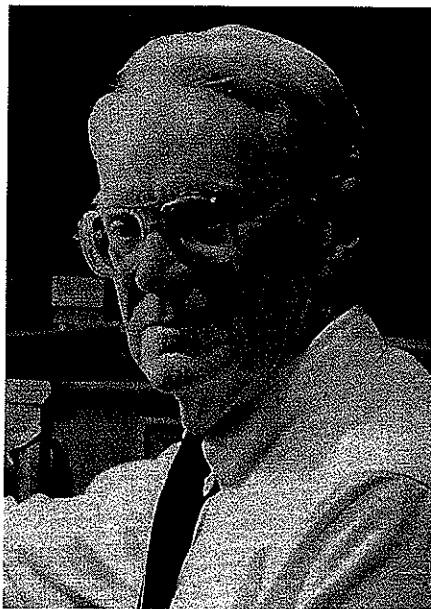
I remember getting the biggest thrill hearing the full organ accompanying the congregation at the First Presbyterian Church in Oklahoma City, where I grew up. Presiding at the 1911 Austin was Mrs. Frank, who was an excellent musician trained at Oberlin.

Were you always interested in the organ?

Yes. The grandeur of it—the gravity was so fascinating. I loved when the low pedal notes made the pews vibrate. I enjoyed it in church and in the movie houses. I especially remember when Milton Slosser would come to town to play a short program during intermission in the movies.

Did your mother and father play instruments?

My mother played piano and organ. Before I was born, my father was transferred to a town south of Oklahoma City. At the time, my mother was prominent in music circles in the state, and before they moved, she wrote ahead to the Presbyterian church inquiring whether or not they would need an organist. They wrote back and said they would be glad to have her. The problem was that she couldn't play! So she took six lessons and became an organist! She laughed years later at the sort of nerve she had. She gave me a few informal piano lessons when I was very young. Mostly she would play the pieces for me and I would play them back by ear, unbeknownst to her. She didn't catch on right away that I wasn't reading the notes, until I started "fixing up" the pieces! I just didn't see what the big advantage of reading notes was, because I could already play things without read-



ing. I would hear a tune on the radio and play it on the piano, my own version, of course!

My father was an electrical engineer but took pleasure in playing the violin as an avocation. When I was a youngster, he and I would play duets. This is how I learned to sight-read. He played clarinet before that, and it was in the church orchestra that he and my mother met. My dad would bring home a new record every Saturday, and that is how I first heard Harold Darke—playing the Mozart *Fantasy in F Minor* (K. 608). I was eight years old and used to listen to it over and over.

After high school, you went right into the service. Was this a formative part of your life?

Very definitely. At least it gave me the opportunity to mature personally. After being in the service, I knew that I wanted to go into music for certain. I had been vacillating between music and architecture. I could show you stacks of old drawings and sketches of buildings that I did in drafting classes. In fact, whenever I designed a church, I would design an organ to go into it, such as it was.

I remember a story you told about running across the Franck Cantabile in the army.

But first, when I was in junior high school, I ran across a recording of Charles Courboin playing Franck on the E.M. Skinner at the Academy of Arts and Letters in New York. I'd never heard anything like it. This is my first recollection of hearing the organ music of Franck. And then, years later, when I

was in the service, I came across the score for the *Cantabile*. When one is in the army, one grasps at anything that isn't obtuse and common, and so I latched onto it. It must have taken me 20 minutes to play through it, and not because I couldn't read the notes, but simply because I couldn't resist wallowing in every harmonic progression. I've noticed that some students will do this even today!

I was in the service for 32 months and ten days. I picked up my \$500 discharge pay and went back to Oklahoma City. I was on the G.I. bill, which meant I could go to college anywhere I wanted, provided I could get in. Somebody suggested Juilliard. My organ teacher from home, Dubert Dennis, said Eastman was the only place for me to go. He introduced me to the Gleason method and made me particular about note values, rest values, and touch. I was enrolled as a piano major at Oklahoma City University for that first year out of the service, but I ended up playing an organ recital under Dubert.

In the meantime, Virgil Fox had come to town; and my teacher said that I should play for him. So we all went back to my teacher's church and I played some music from my upcoming recital. Fox was very encouraging and said that I should come to New York and study with him. I told him of my plans to go to Eastman and he said that he hoped they wouldn't hurt me any, but that he wished me well! On my way to Eastman that next summer, I went by way of New York City and visited him at Riverside. He not only remembered me, but remembered what I played for him (said it was sexy!), and then invited me out to lunch. He was a very kind person.

How did you audition for Eastman?

I sent a recording of both organ and piano. On the organ, I played both the B-minor Prelude of Bach, *In dir ist Freude* and the *Pièce héroïque* of Franck. At first, because of admissions priorities, I was put on a waiting list. But when Harold Gleason heard the organ tape, he wrote to me and said that he would very much like to have me in his class and that I should check to see that all of my materials were in. In a few days time, I was admitted. I first met Gleason in the promenade hallway outside the Eastman Theatre. Once I started working with him, he saw that I needed some basic teaching. We got out the Gleason method and went back nearly to page one and got down to business, especially with the Bach manualiter as well as more pedal work.

How would you characterize his teaching style?

He was never gruff, and I never saw him lose his temper. Harold was always gentle and kind but to the point. He was extremely disciplined. Everything had to be meticulously prepared. One never sluffed over anything. Everything had to be practiced for every eventuality, but always keeping the music before the listener. "Don't forget the music," he would say. He would sing and conduct often in lessons, but not too much. He would allude to music literature in general. He had a broad command of repertoire of all instruments as well as for the orchestra. He would often refer us to recordings of other pieces. He thought piano music and playing were very important, ensemble playing as well. He had a drole sense of humor, which he put to use in lessons. He had a marvelous use of the language, using simile and metaphor.

Gleason was very supportive. Once I had just finished playing the *Prelude and Fugue in D Major*, and he said, "You may have a better pedal technique than you think." On other occasions, after a long discussion on style and authenticity, he would say, "But don't forget the music. You must feel it." That was about the size of the compliments, but they were well taken. He never browbeat us, even though he was very

exacting. He would demonstrate in lessons, but would more often conduct or sing along. (He didn't have a very good voice, but that didn't seem to stop him!) He followed my career after I left, and we remained great friends until his death.

You stayed at the Eastman School for four years. Three years to complete the undergraduate work, and one for the Master's and Performer's Certificate.

For the Performer's Certificate, along with a recital, I performed the Peeters *Organ Concerto*, which was then a new piece. The choice had been between that and the Poulenc, and I picked the Peeters because it had a big pedal cadenza and it would be the North American premiere. At any rate, I got excellent reviews (in those days the local paper reviewed student concerto performances). Howard Hanson was the conductor with the Eastman-Rochester Symphony Orchestra.

What happened when you finished at Eastman?

At first I didn't know what I was going to do. I had gone to Harold Gleason to get his advice about pursuing the Artist's Diploma. Later I had heard from a colleague that the job at MacMurray College was opening and that they were getting a new four-manual Aeolian-

Skinner, for which Harold was consultant. A few days later I heard that I was being recommended for this position by the Eastman School. I flew out to audition and interview, and it was a honeymoon right from the start. They offered me the job quickly thereafter, and I moved out later that summer. I was not quite 25 when I began and remained there for 11 years—perfectly happy.

I loved teaching. At first, I taught freshman theory and junior-year counterpoint as well as organ. During my first year the chairman said, "You'd like to conduct the orchestra, wouldn't you!" He had heard that I had played string bass in high school and thought that I was qualified enough since they needed someone immediately. Well, in those days, you didn't say no, so I was the conductor for a year. Besides, I had only six organ students then.

In my second year, when the new Aeolian-Skinner arrived, the college and the local radio station wanted me to play a weekly Sunday afternoon broadcast on the new organ. I had to keep up a varied repertoire. I even got some fan mail from listeners.

You have often talked about your trips to Chicago to hear great artists at Orchestra Hall.

Yes, but MacMurray also brought a number of great artists to the campus:

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Jean Langlais, Leontyne Price, Myra Hess. I don't know how we could have afforded Hess, for example, except that she liked to play on college campuses.

Once I was getting ready for my faculty recital in Merner Chapel at MacMurray and was to play the following Friday when a friend tried to coax me to Chicago to hear Myra Hess. Well, I thought I shouldn't go at first, but my practicing wasn't going very well at the time, so he talked me into it. We didn't get back until 6:30 the next morning, and after having sat up on the train all night, I had to teach an 8:00 A.M. theory class! I didn't have to play until the following night, but I was so charged up after that recital that I was red hot! It brought back to my mind what performing was all about—musical communication. It was amazing to hear her play—like something from another world. And the waves of love that would go out from the crowd when she walked on stage were overwhelming. This was 1955 or so, and she was still remembered by many Americans because of her work in London during World War II. In fact, when she came out on stage, even before she started to play, she received a standing ovation.

How did you come to Michigan?

It was 1962. I saw that Marilyn Mason was playing a recital in Springfield, so I

went as I had never heard her. I met her afterwards. She was very gracious, and a few days later I got a letter from her saying that they had an opening on the organ faculty and invited me to come to Michigan to audition and interview. Of course, at the time I thought this would be a fine opportunity for the future, so I went. To make a longer story short, I was offered the position, and indeed it did offer great opportunity. I began in 1962.

At this time you were already established in the profession?

I had had a few big concerts. I played for the AGO regional convention in Columbia, Missouri, where, in fact, I first met Russell Saunders with whom I began a lifelong friendship. Later I played in Los Angeles for a national convention in 1962.

Did it seem very different when you came to Ann Arbor?

Oh yes. I didn't have the control I had had at MacMurray over what the students learned and how they progressed. At Michigan, I had graduate students with a more varied background; at MacMurray, I had undergraduates and worked with them early in their formation.

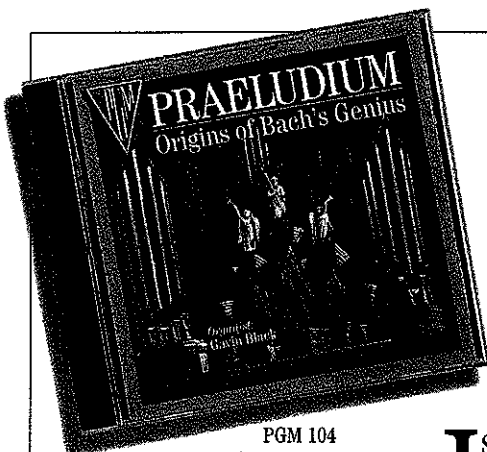
What have been some of your greatest memories?

A number of my students' performances. I think unless you've taught, you don't really understand what that means. They're like your kids. You don't want to baby them, but you're very concerned that you might have missed something in teaching. If they run into trouble in performance, it's very easy to blame yourself. But when they succeed, it's just great!

And it's not just the brilliant geniuses, but also the ones who are not so gifted that triumph over adversity, and come up with something that you didn't think possible. Later you think, "My God! That was a miracle." And maybe I had something to do with it, and maybe I didn't, but I'm still thrilled for them.

What about your own performances?

I can remember feeling very good about the first time I played the Liszt *Ad nos* in 1965. I had heard a radio broadcast of Mme Duruflé, and thought it would make an interesting project. I had only eight weeks to learn it, but I was determined to play it for the upcoming regional convention in Hill Auditorium that year. I think it must have been the most disciplined and efficient practicing I've ever done. It was received very well at the time when it was certainly not in vogue. This was at a time when many organists turned up their noses at Liszt and raised an eyebrow even at



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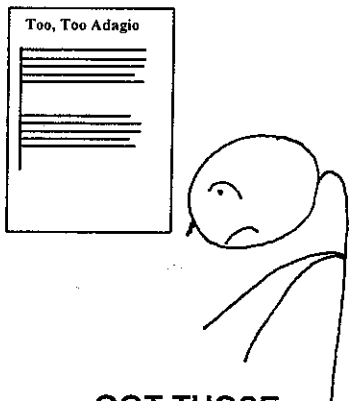
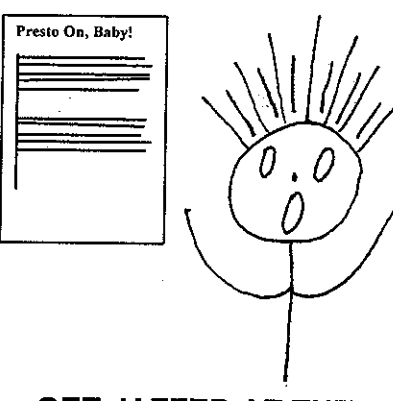


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And you need to be able to use imagery well. Any means you can use to put across the musical idea, you use. Sometimes it's the wackier allusions that you make that are the most memorable for the student.

I recall teaching Widor's *Symphonie romane* to a student. There are some excruciating beautiful moments in the piece, and the student was having the common problem of holding on to these for too long—being too reluctant to go on. As a result, the piece was losing its momentum and direction. I remember saying to him that he was dwelling on these moments as if he was being nostalgic, but really nostalgia happens when one leaves behind the beautiful moment and goes on. The delicious pain is in having to go. You dwell as long as you dare, but you must go on. That's nostalgia, the bittersweet quality created because of the conflict!

What advice would you give to a young teacher these days?

You need to be demanding and sympathetic in good balance. I don't think it does a student any good to praise him when he's done nothing praiseworthy. I think he ends up being at best puzzled, and at worst he might even believe you. He needs to come to grips with how things really are but still receive encouragement.

What's going on in the organ world in 1997, considering that recital attendance seems to be diminishing?

I hear of this happening, but I must say that the last few years I've played to very good or nearly full houses. And I don't think it's necessarily because I'm on the program, but rather that these recitals have been part of an established series. There's a certain tradition behind hearing organ music in these places and they don't get discouraged if they have a bad year or a few weaker performances. Of course, wisely chosen programs are important. I feel encouraged when I meet young people coming into schools as undergraduates. Not just here in Ann Arbor, but students that I meet in masterclasses around the country. I also am greatly encouraged by the Pipe Organ Encounters that the AGO is sponsoring. This seems to attract lots of bright kids to the organ and its music.

What have been some of your most memorable experiences of playing "on the road"?

When I was younger I thought playing on the road was glamorous, but I soon got over that. I am amazed at how some people arrive at a church the day before and come out and play. I just don't feel good about playing unless I can have two or even three days before a recital to get used to the organ and the registration. There's always the risk of

Mendelssohn. The *Ad nos* is a great work.

I can understand that one's playing can inform one's teaching, but do you think the reverse is true?

Absolutely. Through teaching a piece, you're thinking about the work as you teach it. You can get a different slant on it by taking a step back for a better perspective. You can also get good insights from students! They're not exactly illiterate musically, you know! Harold Gleason was the model in this regard. On his way to a doctoral oral, he said to me, "You know I learn something new everyday." His mind was open at all times, and never didactic.

Do you think your teaching has changed much since you first started?

I suppose, but I'm not sure quite how. I stick to the basics. You size up the students to see what they need and then you give it to them. I suppose I can do it more efficiently now, get to the point more quickly.

What about students' musical goals?

It's a matter of showing students how to do their best. The risk is that they can fall apart when they get away from your coaching, because they don't really understand what they've done.

What do you mean by coaching?

Conducting or singing at lessons without musical explanation. Masterclass coaching can be dangerous because the teacher might be able to stir up a certain amount of excitement, but when the students try to recreate it, they don't have

the intellectual or emotional backing to know quite how. They don't know what really happened. They've come to depend too much on your coaching.

What's an example of what you see in a score that needs coaching or explaining?

It might be in the area of form. How various sections relate to each other. Also in the area of performance practice, although they are only keys to the answer and not the answer.

You talk about gesture a lot in your teaching.

It all relates to rhythmic and melodic contour. When you hear the word "gesture" you immediately think of physical movement and you begin to move. Much like a dancer illustrates a musical idea. I find that conducting the student or, more to the point, getting the student to conduct helps enormously. I will ask the student how they might conduct a certain gesture, like a fermata, and in the act of doing it, they firm up the whole idea in their mind and body.

Besides the Gleasons, are there other artists whose teaching or performance has affected you?

Elizabeth Schwarzkopf and Myra Hess come to mind, in a general way, and Anton Heiller and Arthur Poister. I used to observe their masterclasses, which were always fascinating to say the least.

One's vocabulary and choice of words are important in teaching.

To be a good teacher, one needs a fairly firm grasp of the English language.

annoying intrusions and other problems, so I try to get there as early as I can. Recently, I arrived at a venue four days before the recital date, a Sunday afternoon, only to have the preceding day taken for a big wedding.

I enjoyed very much going back to play at MacMurray College several years ago. One of the most memorable times was when MacMurray conferred on me an honorary doctorate and then asked me to play on their Community Concert Series. I thought that was one of the best performances I'd given. It was a great house and even some of my students from Ann Arbor drove down to attend.

This year you're being honored by the New York City Chapter of the AGO as the International Performer of the Year. Do you have any reaction to that?

Naturally, I feel greatly honored, but I think they must have run out of prospects! There's so much fine playing these days. Still, it could have been a matter of effective musical communication.

Do you see any bad trends in organ playing and teaching today?

I thought there were some crazy things—exaggerations of various sorts—happening for a few years, but I think we've come out of it and returned to sanity. At Eastman the Gleasons did talk about what they called the "hot key"

way of playing, which simply meant a kind of super-staccato sort of articulation. This is why they would always stress carefully timed attacks and releases; that is, durational time.

Do you have any feeling about being renowned for 19th- and 20th-century French music?

It's not all I like to do. The situation is something like having a Steinway concert grand at one's disposal. What music will you play on it? Probably 19th- and 20th-century music. That's how it's been for me. I've had mostly Aeolian-Skinners to play on and I've played the music that they do most effectively. You know the saying, "When you have lemons, you make lemonade!" This is not to imply that the organs were lemons!

Is there something about the spirituality of that repertoire that attracts you?

There must be, but I'm not sure what. I only know that I was immediately drawn to the sound of Cavallé-Coll organs—and so Tournemire, Franck, Widor, and Vierne seemed natural!

Is there a period or style of music that you are not attracted to?

I don't have much feeling for Reger, except for some of the smaller pieces. It's not my temperament. But I admire a fine performance of Reger. I don't feel

comfortable playing much avant-garde music. Something about putting my elbows down on the keyboards, I guess. I'm not convinced that's for me to play, although I've heard enormously effective performances. I admire a fine performance of nearly anything—even a few transcriptions.

I don't think everyone has to play everything, especially as one grows older. I do believe that when you're young you should investigate lots of different styles and periods of music. But as you grow into maturity, you find your repertoire becoming more selective. It's finally most important to find a repertoire that you deem right for you.

You seem drawn to music in larger forms.

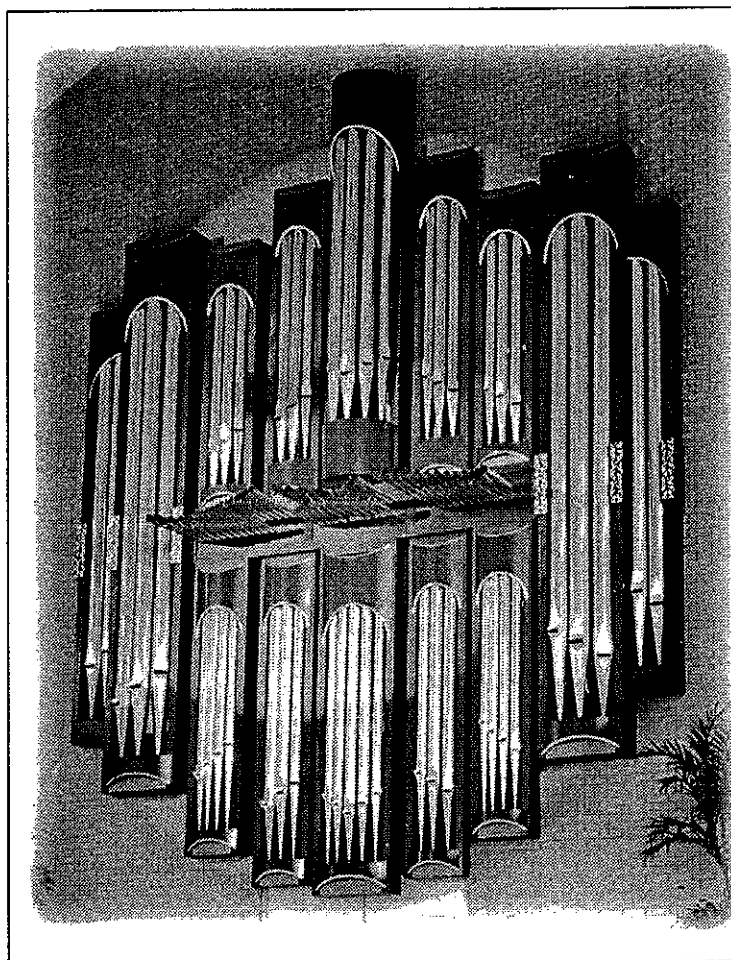
Yes, I think that it may relate to my orchestral and symphonic experience. The grand line, the dramatic gesture, and the complex sonority have always fascinated me.

If you had it to do over again, would you change anything?

Get more piano study at an early age!

Why music?

Because I can't imagine life without it. It's spiritual. As Bruno Walter said, there's a spiritual dimension to great music. It's a necessary part of being alive.



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